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ABSTRACT

The manager of a London youth center presents a personal perspective on some of the difficulties that exist for young people in today's society, particularly those faced by young Black males. Following the sudden death of his mother and teenage years dominated by the values of the street, he took control of his life by seeking knowledge and qualifications that would create new personal opportunities. In his work with young people, he seeks to be a role model and to extend a small ray of hope to others in the Black community. Some of the difficulties facing young people, particularly Black males, are: (1) early labeling due to racial or ethnic differences, leading to teacher expectations of low achievement; (2) few opportunities for unqualified young people, particularly if they are Black, and a struggle against bias even for qualified Black people; (3) stereotypes of the young Black male, such as the irresponsible unmarried father; (4) the role of the Black male in the family; (5) peer group pressures to achieve material success through crime; (6) mass media influence and the desire for immediate gratification of all desires; (7) racial harassment by police; (8) lack of positive community commitment to its youth; (9) contradictions between what is taught in school and what is happening on the streets; and (10) drug-related violence. (SV)

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A Personal Perspective

LEE PARKER

Lee is Centre Manager of the Dick Sheppard Youth Centre, attached to the Dick Sheppard School in Tulse Hill, Brixton. As Lee himself says, as a youngster he was both troubled and frequently in trouble before finding the personal resources and encouragement to undertake further education and training. Lee presented the study weekend with a personal perspective of some of the difficulties that exist for young people in today's society, in particular those faced by young black males.

Background:

Teenager

I found this period a rather disturbing one, but a very integral and influential part of my life which enabled me to lay the foundation for my true vocation in life.

As a teenager I was dominated by the influences of what was happening on the street, ie money, material possessions, easily acquired wealth and position, champagne life styles etc, which all represented false values in that money was deemed as the main status symbol no matter how acquired and without it you were a nobody who counted for nothing.

My father was a very strict authoritarian who believed that a disciplined and well ordered upbringing was the most important aspect of raising children. Whereas when I look back now, the gentle loving care and supportive role of my mother would have been far more beneficial. I do, however, owe a great deal to my father to whom I give every respect for all his efforts under somewhat difficult circumstances and who continues to be a formidable pillar of strength.

Turning points

The turning points in my life were two-fold, beginning with the sudden and dramatic death of my mother and the almost inevitable loss of my own life through ritualistic encounters on the streets. It was at that point that I began to realise that far more existed beyond the cocoon that I had created amongst the infamous people of the streets.

When I finally took control of my life I sought refuge in the educational institutions from which I had so long ago escaped. I found that by endeavouring to acquire knowledge and qualifications I began to see doors opening and opportunities being created upon the horizon, something which had for a very long time evaded me or was overshadowed by the sparkle of the high life I had been living.

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I found that through self-awareness I was capable of having choices and was thus responsible for my covert and overt behaviour. With the ability and resources available to live effectively I was able to restore myself through my own assets.

Over the past 10-15 years I believe that I have been truly resurrected from the ashes like a phoenix. I have channelled a lot of my anger and aggression at society, firstly for the death of my mother and secondly for the injustices that society has deemed to create for me as a black man.

I have now turned the negative aspects of my life into positive ones in terms of educating myself sufficiently to fulfil many of my roles, as without knowledge one can only really ever have an unfulfilled destiny.

Qualifications are one of the tools by which society recognises that you have acquired the necessary skills to perform and function within it. I have also created a profile for myself within the environment in which I work to enable young people that I come into contact with to be able to emulate and focus upon me as a role model.

I do not see myself as a crusader but quite simply as a black man striving to fulfil a role despite all the obstacles that society throws in my way and in so doing making my mark in the only way that I can by opening up a small ray of hope to others within the community.

I am not for one second saying that this task has been easy and I am most certainly not projecting this image to the young people that I come into contact with as this is unrealistic and would be a rather idealistic point of view, but nevertheless, hope is hope no matter how small it is.

I sometimes feel as if I am shipwrecked on an island and my only chance of survival is to send a message in a bottle in the hope that, against all of nature's elements, my message will be clear enough to be understood and help is sent my way.

Education/Opportunities:

Low Achievers

Once again we are faced with what society has dictated. With statistical studies and labelling society has sown the seeds at a very early age that certain individuals, because of their ethnic or cultural differences, will automatically be diagnosed as disadvantaged. Principally these are the indirect pressures our youngsters are going to be faced with even before they contemplate learning to read and write.

This labelling is institutionalised into the teaching system and when dealing with specific youngsters it is all too clear that even before he/she speaks, the colour of their skin has already done the talking.

Qualifications

What opportunities exist for a young person without qualifications? The question, like any other for both black and white youngsters, is one of having no credibility, standing or opportunities within society as you are only recognised as an individual by your achievements or qualifications and in so doing, this will only give you a fraction of an edge against all the other obstacles, which are increased if the individual is black, laid before you in your attempt to gain employment.

What opportunities exist for a qualified black person? In an ideal world it should be the same as a white person; however this is not the case and so the odds are stacked against this person even before due recognition is given to this person's qualifications. The need to excel in order to promote initial recognition as a form of distraction from the colour of the person's skin and to overcome the already visible signs for stereotyping.

Stigma/Stereotypes:

Denial of Fatherhood

A great deal of emphasis is focused on male members of families. Society has projected the image that they are irresponsible, habitually wanting to father many children without marriage or commitment to the mothers or children involved; having no desire to work to support same; are happy-go-lucky and care-free without any attachments or future goals set for themselves and sometimes little is done to change that misconception. The truth of the matter is that too many pressures are laid at their doorstep and like most people, having the freedom of choice as to which responsibility or pressure takes priority over another is just as daunting and demanding as opting not to make a choice at all.

The intense sense of commitment and urge to want to support a family exists but many obstacles prevent them from doing so; this then quells their will to provide support and starts the process of denial so as not to have to focus on the problem, believing that it will disappear or self-support itself. This decision is not always a conscious one but in time it takes precedence over all the others that exist.

The Role of the Black Male in the Family

An enormous amount of pressure is placed upon the male member of the family and this is compounded even more for the black male member. He has already to deal with the preconceived stigmas and stereotypes being attached to him by society and fight to overcome these together with the pressures placed upon him by his family who have already mapped out his life in the place of their own which has been stunted by prejudice. The mere fact of not only having to face his daily realities but also to convey to his family that although times have changed and opportunities do now exist, the overt racism has been replaced by covert racism and a passive acceptance of power.

The peer group pressure syndrome is also reinforced by employment statistics. When youngsters are ready to leave educational institutions they are catapulted into the real world where they face racism, not perhaps for the first time, conformities of the world of work, being outside their peer groups, not being equipped to interrelate with other members of staff, etc. In some cases they then turn back to their own community for help which with limited resources and opportunities is unable to provide the means by which these youngsters' needs can be met, thereby resulting in them taking one of the few options of achieving the things they most desire, eg money, success, prospects, ambition, better housing, wealth, etc, through crime. CRIME PAYS!

I am not for one moment suggesting that other avenues do not exist within the community but limited resources directed into the community make the options available to these youngsters somewhat limited and their scope for development even less. Therefore one must look outside this community in order to bring more into it or extend the community into the outside by interaction.

Crime and Criminality:

Lack of Opportunities

We have all claimed to have been there and done it, thereby feeling that we have empathy, to an extent, with the pressures that are prevalent amongst our youngsters at school, but I believe that we can in no way begin to compare the pressures that the younger generation are now facing and which are being exerted upon them today, to what we have experienced ourselves.

What were our main concerns at their age? Wanting to stay out late, being allowed to smoke and drink, having enough money to spend on the latest fashion, independence, wanting to be understood and respected by our parents, the need to be trusted where sex, etc, was concerned.

What are their concerns? Not wanting to stay out late - but staying out late anyway; experimenting with drugs and sex at an earlier age, wanting more money, demanding independence and taking it because they cannot wait for it to be given to them. Not caring whether or not they are understood but demanding respect nonetheless. There is no longer a desire, only an urgent need for it to be done now. This is what is happening on the streets and it is what is being projected to the young people on a daily basis, whether at home, in schools, or via the media, showing the adults fighting among themselves for power, money, over politics, religion, etc. It is like giving them a fragmented insight into what they will face eventually. The overwhelming desire is, therefore, to live now and enjoy it while it lasts.

Society has also influenced their values by placing heavy demands on their parents in terms of employment, housing, education and in so doing many of the once strong values instilled in them are under enormous pressure in order to keep abreast of changes being demonstrated by the younger generation.

Young Black Men, the Police and the Community:

Again, if we look at the points raised earlier, the formulation of the above roles are all influenced by misconceptions and assumptions which are not always based on fact and are reinforced by the media, society, peer group, etc. What is needed, therefore, is a greater understanding which will only come about if we are all prepared to interrelate and cross those barriers which are placed in front of us.

Young Black Men

Young people, both black and white, need to be aware of what the role of the police really is within the community, not just what is told to them. It needs to be demonstrated, as all too many of them have had their own personal experiences which tend to lend more weight to their reasons for distrust.

The Police

The police service needs to have a far greater understanding of the Community it is protecting and its value and contribution to society as with any other community group. Its awareness of the cultural differences within each group is also a must. Stereotyping must now begin to be a thing of the past and a respect for an individual's right to be who they are, from whom the police also expect the same respect, must be of paramount importance.

The Community

The community must be aware of all of the needs within it, whether it can fulfil these needs and the image it wants to convey both to its members and the world. Acceptance of being proactive on issues which affect it and not always reactive is a start in learning to adapt to its surroundings. Fragmentation will occur if members of the community disown or deny identification with their community.

Identity/Music:

Success and Self Awareness

Identification with the community and the problems associated with it are portrayed within the music; therefore as a means to feel a part of this community, music is the key which can unlock and amplify these feelings across not only its own community, but also to the world which will enable a united awareness. The music itself tends to be strong, vibrant and instrumental, a form of expression of the community's strength, unity and the image which it would like to project.

For many, however, it is also an area in which the key to success lies. The welcoming doors of the music world give youngsters an element of hope in that in this playground there are no rules relevant to the colour of your skin and what society depicts as being relevant only to minority groups. Your talent is what counts: something that only you can have control over and with the help of others is nurtured successfully. It is not about who has the most power, majority rule; it is control of your ambitions and goals with the only other competitors being other musicians.

The respect and recognition that is sometimes attached to a successful individual can be such that it outweighs even the initial reasons for this career choice. It bring with it power, wealth, opportunities, self-promotion and an escape from the community. It is quite simply a means to an end.

Peer Group Pressure:

Once again the educational system plays a major part in sustaining pressure upon our youngsters. The realities of what they are taught in schools and what is actually happening on the streets which directly has an effect upon them and their families contradicts itself.

They are being taught about opportunities that exist for them within society yet, amongst their class members, there are hardened criminals in the making who have no qualms about displaying their wares and reinforcing to these youngsters that the only way to succeed is to do the things that they do, thereby bringing wealth and recognition now without the prospect of having to work for the rest of your life for it. This pressure is compounded by the need to be a part of what is happening, not feeling isolated and not a member of your fellow peer group and community.

Drugs/Guns:

The ever-evolving and accelerating changes in the world bring new tests for the survival and existence of its occupants and with it must come a means by which the inhabitants can protect themselves from other predators who are competing for the same game and struggling to claim a part or become a part of that ever-decreasing world.

Drugs have brought an epidemic like none before which nucleus seems to be a community which is starved of the cure in terms of resources, and still hungry for the wealth which is associated with the drugs, to create these resources.

Guns are one of its answers for survival during this epidemic and to kill or be killed is the motto of the gun carriers. Killing, it seems, is the way in which the drug dealers are preserving this epidemic amongst themselves so that they can get fatter off the poor. This disease is being carried down into the schools and amongst the young people as a way of life. The value of a person's life is being cheapened by the continual use of guns as a way of silencing and finally ending an argument without further debate. Having the upper hand or last say seems paramount. It brings recognition. It is not how the battle is won but the artillery used to end the battle.

The actual use and the calibre of a gun tends to carry far more weight in terms of the person's magnitude and notoriety. The fact that a life or lives have been extinguished has no bearing upon its use.

The gun itself commands no respect but the carrier most certainly gives it that.